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English only

Fifty-seventh session
Agenda item 52
Strengthening of the United Nations system

Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change

Responses to issues raised and supplementary information

1. This conference room paper is intended to provide responses to and supplementary information on the major issues raised by various regional groups and individual Member States on the report of the Secretary-General on "Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change" (A/57/387 and Corr.1). The paper covers issues related to public information, development and social and economic issues (actions 1 and 6 through 18) to be considered at the open-ended informal consultations of the General Assembly, to be held on Monday, 4 November 2002.

Action 1

2. The priorities agreed to at the Millennium Assembly have been included in the revisions to the medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005, which the Secretary-General has submitted pursuant to regulations 4.6 and 4.13 of the Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation (ST/SGB/2000/8). The proposed revisions have been considered by the Committee for Programme and Coordination and is currently, together with the recommendations of the Committee for Programme and Coordination, on the agenda of the Fifth Committee. Programme managers are also currently in receipt of programme budget instructions, which address the new priorities arising from the Millennium Declaration (resolution 55/2).

3. Specific revisions reflecting the Millennium Declaration are proposed in programmes 7 to 19 and 26. The Committee for Programme and Coordination has generally supported the revisions relating to the Millennium Declaration, and its report includes a number of expressions of appreciation for the inclusion of the United Nations Millennium Declaration in the revised medium-term plan proposals as a new mandate.

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4. The proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 will be based on the revised medium-term plan, incorporating the Millennium Declaration. In addition to the inclusion of new mandates in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005 through the mechanism of their inclusion in the revised medium-term plan, other subsequent mandates will be reflected consistent with the provisions of regulation 5.2 of the programme planning regulations. The regulation recognizes that mandates adopted subsequent to the adoption of the plan or its latest revision may be reflected in the proposed programme budget. Thus, mandates arising in respect of the Monterrey and Johannesburg conferences will be incorporated on this basis, consistent with existing practice for recently adopted mandates.

5. The proposed programme budget outline for 2004-2005 contained in document A/57/85 indicates under the heading "Provision for programme changes in 2004-2005" that "During the biennium 2004-2005, implementation of the programme budget will include continued reinforcement of programmes to enhance capacity for meeting the United Nations Millennium Declaration goals" (para. 6).

6. For 2004-2005, in the context of departmental submissions for the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2004-2005, programme managers have been requested to examine in more detail programme outputs to ensure that they are tightly focused on the new priorities arising from the Millennium Declaration and from the outcomes of global conferences. It can thus be anticipated that while some new or modified outputs are to be produced, it will also be necessary to refocus resources away from old outputs, which are of marginal utility. This will allow the pursuit of new priorities while remaining within the limited financial resources available to the Organization.

7. In connection with refocusing resources towards new priorities, a key role will be played by the termination of outputs of marginal utility, pursuant to regulation 5.6 (rule 105.6). In this connection, it will be recalled that the General Assembly, in its resolution 56/253, requested the Secretary-General to implement regulation 5.6 and to report to the Assembly on his effort. Under this regulation, the Secretary-General is requested to submit to the Assembly, with justification, a list of outputs included in the previous budget period which, in his judgement, can be discontinued and which, as a consequence, have not been included in the proposed programme budget. This will be done in the context of proposals for the programme budget for 2004-2005 and is expected to contribute to the refocusing of resources on new priorities.

Action 6

8. The new structure of the Department of Public Information came into effect functionally on 1 November 2002, and will enter into force administratively upon the issuance of the relevant Secretary-General's bulletin. It will also be the basis of section 28 of the proposed 2004-2005 programme budget, which is being prepared at this time. The restructuring, including the reallocation of resources within a given section of the approved programme budget of a Department (such as the Department of Public Information) is within the prerogative of the Secretary-General. However, the transfer of the Cartographic Section from the Department of Public Information to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations involves the transfer of functions and

resources from one budget section to another, and therefore requires the approval of the General Assembly.

9. The restructuring will enhance the ability of the Department of Public Information to maintain and improve its activities in areas of special interest to the developing countries. The Department will use as its guide the Millennium Declaration and the outcomes of major conferences. As requested in General Assembly resolution 34/182 of 18 December 1979, the Committee on Information is to, among other matters, examine United Nations public information policies and activities and to evaluate and follow up the efforts made and the progress achieved by the United Nations system in the field of information and communication.

10. The Department of Public Information is continually working to improve its outreach to the developing countries; the United Nations News Centre and the News Service, for example, are directed primarily at the needs of developing countries for access to United Nations information. While these proposals should increase the information resources available to developing countries, they will not directly further help to bridge the information technology divide. However, existing programmes of the Department, the Secretary-General's Information and Communication Technologies Task Force and the work of other United Nations departments and agencies, such as the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme, continue to contribute to this important goal.

11. The definition of the United Nations overall communications strategy and the broad directives for the work of the Department of Public Information emanate from the Committee on Information, and therefore this Committee's role is critical in the work of the Department of Public Information and its current reform. The first phase of the comprehensive review of the Department was presented to the Committee last May, and further discussion on the substance of the Department's reform will take place next year. The Committee on Information is the Department's guide — and indeed its partner — in repositioning the Department for greater effect.

Action 7

12. Often in the past there has been a tendency to focus on the product rather than the result. In order to ensure the most effective use of the resources allocated to it, the Department of Public Information wants to make sure its activities and products are useful and have the desired impact. If not, adjustments need to be made. Therefore, a thorough and systematic evaluation, involving both Headquarters and the field, is necessary and will require both time and resources. The results of such evaluations will be communicated to intergovernmental organs.

13. Separately, under action 21, we are proposing a broader system of evaluation and monitoring for the Secretariat as a whole, to have a better sense of the effectiveness of our work overall.

Action 8

14. As regards the establishment of regional hubs, this will be applied in a flexible way and in consultation with the countries concerned. The Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information has already addressed a number of the questions and concerns in his statements to the Special Political and Decolonization

Committee. If the General Assembly approves the principle of a reorganization of the network of information centres into regional hubs, the Secretary-General would begin with Western Europe and, continuing to keep Member States fully informed, would reflect such changes in the appropriate budget.

Action 9

15. The Department's proposals to improve electronic access to United Nations collections and to facilitate the transfer of paper collections to electronic files will ensure that hard copies of all such documents will be available upon request for developing countries, where it is impossible to access them electronically. In addition, the Department will continue to seek to enhance developing country access to the electronic resources of the Organization. As far as major media in developing countries is concerned, our inquiries over the last few years have revealed that most media do in fact have access to e-mail and the Internet, and prefer to receive materials via e-mail.

16. The Secretary-General has called in his reform report to improve the management of United Nations libraries by having the Dag Hammarskjöld Library in New York assume responsibility for setting policy and coordinating the work of all United Nations libraries. By doing so, the existing synergies among United Nations libraries will be maximized to the fullest extent. At the same time, in conjunction with the Department of Management, the Department has been asked to prepare a comprehensive plan for the integration of the United Nations library services at various locations, through the use of information and communication technologies.

Action 10

17. The proposal suggests a more efficient means of providing publications to their intended audiences, which implies that a combination of both electronic and print dissemination would enhance overall readership of the content. The Organization needs to ensure that publications in languages other than English can be produced and disseminated in the most effective manner. Current constraints brought about by such issues as the translation of publications, however, will not be directly relieved by this proposal.

18. As far as the United Nations web site is concerned, major advances have been achieved in providing more documents and materials in all official languages. The United Nations News Centre is already operating in English and French and will soon be available in the remaining four official languages. With the opening up of the direct link feature to the Official Document System (ODS) there has been a significant increase in the number of official documents now available through the web site in all languages. However, the provision and maintenance of all content on the web site in all official languages is a mammoth undertaking, requiring a major infusion of resources both for content generation and for the infrastructure.

19. For the Department of Public Information to move towards greater parity on the web site, and building on the considerable resources already redeployed to meeting this goal, a series of recommendations have been set out in the report to the General Assembly on strengthening the Department (A/57/355), proposing that additional resources of $1.297 million be allocated under the current biennium for the purposes of ensuring the continued development, maintenance and enrichment of

the web site in all official languages through strengthened language units for web operations.

20. The Department, however, has continued to allocate its present resources to achieve, on a priority basis, the goal of moving towards increased parity, the latest action being the creation of an Internet Service within the News and Media Division, which will be positioned to take advantage of the synergies of current news operations across official languages to move further towards this goal, not least through the development of news centres in all six official languages. With the additional resources, considerably more material can be added to each of the language sites, thereby significantly increasing the amount of information material available in the official languages. Linking of official documents from the web site directly to ODS has already resulted in many more official documents being available through the official language web sites.

21. While we are proud of the vast audience we have been able to create for the United Nations web site, we actually reach many more people every day with our outputs in the traditional media of radio and television. Literally tens of millions of listeners hear the voices of the United Nations and news of major United Nations operations through the Department's live daily radio news bulletins, carried by over 200 United Nations major radio stations around the world in the six official languages and Portuguese. Taped programmes in other languages, such as Kiswahili and Hindi, will also continue to be produced and disseminated.

Action 11

22. A basic aim of "consolidating reports on related subjects" is to strengthen the support that the Secretariat extends to the General Assembly in the exercise of its overall policy-making responsibilities. Providing the Assembly with fewer reports of higher quality that focus on the key policy concerns and address comprehensively their interrelated dimensions will test the capacity of the Secretariat for coherent analysis.

23. Building such capacity within the Secretariat, and, in so doing, providing more effective support to the General Assembly that can help to enhance the policy relevance and impact of its deliberations, is an objective that underlies not only action 11, but also many of the other initiatives outlined in the report of the Secretary-General (A/57/387 and Corr.1).

24. Under the reporting scheme outlined in the context of action 11, the main substantive issues before any given session of the General Assembly would be addressed in a more manageable number of thematic reports of the Secretary-General. An effort will be made to ensure that these reports build on and complement each other so that they together maximize their contribution to effective policy development.

25. While these reports may, if it is substantively justified, respond to more than one reporting request and more than one agenda item — a practice that has already been followed in a number of occasions in the past — care will be exercised to ensure that all requests are duly met and that discussions on each agenda item are properly backstopped.

26. As indicated by the Deputy Secretary-General during the informal consultations on the subject, a consultative process with the Assembly Presidency

and the Chairs of the relevant Assembly Committees will need to be introduced at the end of each Assembly session so that the Secretariat can be advised on the substantive support requirements underlying the various resolutions. Delegations would then be informed, at the beginning of each calendar year, of what documents to expect for the following Assembly session.

27. Document A/57/387 envisages that reports of the Secretary-General, designed along the lines outlined above, would be accompanied by reports of the Secretariat, which could take the form of brief notes, organized in accordance with individual agenda items, that would aim at providing concise background information on: (a) elements of reports of the Secretary-General that are particularly relevant to the item in question; and (b) available documentation, particularly reports of intergovernmental bodies where the issues covered by the relevant agenda items are dealt with in depth. Oral reports will be used only to provide simple, factual information and where there are no major policy implications.

Actions 16 and 17

28. In introducing his report on strengthening of the United Nations (A/57/387), the Secretary-General noted that "the Millennium Declaration, along with the outcomes of the International Conference on Financing for Development, the World Summit on Sustainable Development and other major global conferences of the past decade, have outlined a comprehensive vision of what Member States seek to accomplish" and that his proposals in the document were "driven by our overriding ambition and mission to meet the development goals set for the world's people".

29. Actions 16 and 17, aimed at strengthening the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, should be viewed in this light. As the component of the central Secretariat focused on the promotion of economic and social progress and development, the Department has the responsibility for providing advice and support to the Secretary-General and the intergovernmental machinery in ensuring that the "comprehensive vision" that has resulted from the outcomes of the Millennium Summit and the global conferences is effectively advanced.

30. This requires dedicated capacity for analysis and coordination of the policies and actions that can best serve to further these outcomes, as well as a capacity to advance a coordinated and integrated approach to their follow-up, supported by strategic planning and the management of a complex set of related functions.

31. The work programme of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs covers a wide range: indicators, statistics, projections, development economics and economic management, sustainable development policies (including natural resources management and forest policy), poverty eradication strategies, social integration and social policies and public administration. It encompasses the provision of substantive support to the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, which are mainly responsible for monitoring the follow-up of most of the individual global conferences, the Economic and Social Council itself, the Second and Third Committees of the General Assembly and related forums, which, in addition to specific responsibilities related to the follow-up processes to the Monterrey Conference and the Johannesburg Summit, are where an integrated follow-up to conferences must be ensured.

32. The proposed creation of an additional position of Assistant Secretary-General in the Department will make it possible to organize the work of the Department around two clusters. This will strengthen the management capacity of the Department and help create further synergies within each cluster and between them. Linkages need to be strengthened, for example, between statistical and economic analysis and between the substantive support provided to the functional commissions and that extended to the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly so as to maximize policy coherence and mutual reinforcement.

Action 18

33. The Secretary-General's decision is to entrust the Under-Secretary-General and Adviser for Special Assignments in Africa with the responsibility of coordinating and guiding the process of reviewing and reporting on the support provided by the United Nations system and the international community to Africa's development. It is not proposed to establish a new post. The Adviser for Special Assignments in Africa will report directly to the Secretary-General.

34. The United Nations system, at the level of executive heads in the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, is already committed to fully supporting the New Partnership for Africa's Development. The Adviser for Special Assignments in Africa will, therefore, have responsibility in the review and reporting on United Nations system and international support for the Partnership, as well as on the implementation of summit and conference outcomes as they relate to Africa.

35. In order to ensure that the Adviser for Special Assignments in Africa has sufficient resources to fulfil the above-mentioned coordinating and reporting functions, the resources allocated to the Office of the Special Coordinator for the Least Development Countries in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs will be transferred to his office.